THINK Project

Personal Reflection

As a teacher, it is pertinent to be a reflective professional, so I’m going to practice by reflecting on this semester’s assignment with the THINK project at Shamokin High School. Our task was to observe in a classroom, discover a problem in need of a teacher’s help, and then work to develop a solution to further student-learning. We did just that for this semester-long project, and it proved to be a very rewarding and informative experience for both Britt and me.

The two of us started observing Mr. Bailey in his 12th grade classroom at the beginning of the semester. I had already been observing him for a few months, so I had a pretty good idea about the school, the classroom, the teacher, and the students. But Britt had her own observations to make, and I now had a new purpose for my observing. Right away, Britt and Mr. Bailey got along just fine, and I knew we would all work well together. We discussed the parameters of our project and what our purposes were for being there, as well as what Mr. Bailey expected of us and the goals he already has set for his classroom.

We had to observe a problem in the classroom, something that we, as aspiring educators, could help to solve. Drawing on my previous knowledge of the students there, I had a few ideas and I proposed them to Britt after she had a chance to observe for herself. I knew that Mr. Bailey had approached me previously about the students’ writing, and how he does not feel that they are prepared for college or professional writing. I talked with Britt about observing this, and, with Mr. Bailey’s permission, we took a look at some student work. We observed that the students generally had a lack in focus and purpose. They came up with good ideas, but they were presented without focus and without attention to some basic rules in grammar. We decided that for our purposes, we would choose to focus less on the hard rules of grammar because we knew that Mr. Bailey already had planned to cover those extensively. What we wanted to do was help the students focus by giving them a purpose in writing, something that they could put their mind to, something that was relevant.

So we talked with Mr. Bailey to devise a plan. We looked ahead at some upcoming assignments and we talked with him about how we could help the students with their writing. He explained that his approach is to cover grammar first and then have them practice different genres. We explained what our goals were, and that we planned to take a bit of a different approach for our own activities, one that would focus on writing first and then on going over the rules. We talked with him about how we could mesh his goals with ours, as well as keeping with his planned curriculum for the semester. He told us that he would have us practice by allowing us to teach some of his planned lessons, and that we could incorporate our work throughout the semester as we saw fit. He also explained that he would be having them work on a research project and that we could help the students with that. He said he would give us time at the end of the semester to conduct an entire lesson by ourselves and that it would be a writing workshop.

Our observation of the class over time helped us come up with our final activity. We watched them grow and we got to know each of them. We also observed the curriculum and how it progressed, and determined ways that we could integrate our work into the work that the school and Mr. Bailey had already set forth for them to learn. We also considered where they were academically as well as how they are planning to soon graduate and enter the working world. That is why we gave them a survey that included questions about what kinds of writing they think would be relevant to their job versus what kinds of writing they are already doing. We wanted to make sure that our writing assignment was relevant.

Relevance is what led us to our final activity, our writing workshop. We worked with Mr. Bailey to develop it, and we decided to combine our plan with his. He wanted them to write a business letter, and we thought this would be relevant enough to explain things like audience and choice. We wanted them to pick the topic, keeping their purpose for writing in mind. We figured a business letter would be relevant because most of them indicated that they were soon planning to either go to college or enter the workforce. So we had them write to a potential employer about their experience at Shamokin High School. They could pick at least three things they feel would benefit them in a future career, and it could be as short or as long as they saw fit for the situation. The project went over well, and for the most part, they really put their best effort forth.

Having the students write with purpose in a relevant setting really seemed to help them focus when writing. Instead of writing just to complete a project for school, they were now asked to write to a specific audience with a specific purpose. They were also given the freedom to write about things that had personal meaning to them. They were on-task and they were talking about the assignment, both with us as teachers and with one another. The responses we got were surprising, they wrote with clarity and vision and they took pride and care in their writing.

Two main things that I learned from this process were to be flexible when collaborating with others and to teach with the students’ best interest in mind. Britt and I had our own goals in mind for this project, but it was through collaboration with each other, with Mr. Bailey, and with the students that we were able to come up with a final solution that best fit the situation. We also had to stop along the way and take into consideration what would be best for our students in the time that we were given with them. We had to consider what their own goals were and what we wanted to teach them that would be most relevant and of-value to their futures. With all this in mind, our final project did not look like what we originally envisioned, but it was okay. It had morphed over time due to working with Mr. Bailey and meshing our goals and his, and also due to our considerations of what the students would really need. As I go into student teaching, I will keep in mind what I learned throughout this process, and that is that my students should always be the driving factor behind each lesson I plan. I need to consider what is best and most-relevant for them, and that is when true learning will take place.